

E 601

.B62

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



00005120688





212
FITZHUGH BIRNEY.

A MEMOIR.

George J. Foster.

CAMBRIDGE.

1866.

E 601
B52

UNIVERSITY PRESS: WELCH, BIGELOW, & Co.,
CAMBRIDGE.

6 5637
105

105

05-16572

πόλεμος οὐδέν' ἄνδρ' ἐκὼν
αἶρεϊ πονηρόν. ἀλλὰ τοὺς χρηστοὺς αἶει.

*THE flag is folded; for the battle's din,
The cry of trumpet, and the blaze of gun,
The thunderous rush of squadrons closing in,
The stifled groan, the triumph shout, are done.
And Peace is come, with passionless, mild eyes,—
A mother's eyes, a mother's tenderness.
Calmed by her touch the weary nation lies,
And feels her dewy breath upon his face.
But Time cannot avail, with all his years,
Some chasms in our riven hearts to fill,
Whence misty memories rise to break in tears,
And ghosts of buried hopes that haunt us still,
Yet bring a kind of joy,—the solemn trust
That form is more than unsubstantial dust.*

*If generous parentage or breeding high,
Or that fine strain where love and wit, at one,
Put sisterly each other's jewels on,
Or flawless truth, or spotless purity,
Or beauty, were an armor against Fate;
Then thou, bright blended grace of man and boy,
Sweet memory! wouldst walk, a present joy,
With us, the sunny slope of life, elate!
Dear, blood-bought land, how precious for the cost!
Fair triumph, perfected by private pain!
Bright manhood tried and proved beyond compare!
War wins an awful glory from that lost
Nobility, which was not young in vain;
But Peace twines cypress in her golden hair.*

FITZHUGH BIRNEY.

FITZHUGH BIRNEY was the youngest son of James G. Birney, the distinguished Kentuckian, who, born and bred a slaveholder, emancipated his slaves in 1835, and, in the distribution of his father's estate, took the negroes for his portion, that he might set them also free. When a young man he had been Attorney-General of Alabama. His talents, virtue, and sacrifices made him the candidate of the Liberty Party for the Presidency, in 1844.

By a first marriage with a relative of

General McDowell, Mr. Birney had five sons and one daughter. In 1841, he married Elizabeth P. Fitzhugh, a daughter of the New York branch of an old Maryland family. Fitzhugh Birney was born at Saginaw, Michigan, January 9, 1842. The following April his parents removed to Bay City, near the mouth of the sluggish Saginaw River.

In 1842, the site of the town had been cleared of pine forests; but the only buildings yet erected were the warehouse, the hotel, and the bank. In the hotel Mr. Birney and his family temporarily lodged. In the bank he had an office and a Sunday school. The settlement was much visited by the Ojibway Indians, with whom the boy became a favorite. The first words

he learned to speak were in the Indian tongue.

Fitzhugh was an athletic and adventurous child. He could not remember when he began to swim. Once, before he was five years old, having pushed out on the river in a sail-boat with two little companions, he was discovered at the helm, assuring them that there was no danger, and promising to take them ashore if they would "stop crying." At seven, he skated alone by moonlight from Saginaw to Bay City, a distance of twelve miles.

At four he had learned to read well. From five to eight he was taught by an excellent New England teacher, Miss Berry of Belfast, Maine. In September, 1851, he was placed in Theodore D. Weld's family school at Belleville, New

Jersey, where he remained until, in 1854, Mr. Weld removed to Eagleswood, Perth Amboy. Hither Mr. Birney came, and here he lived until his death in the fall of 1857. During these invalid years Fitzhugh was a nurse to him, as tender and gentle as a girl.

Fitzhugh Birney was a thorough and ambitious student. He unconsciously exerted over his mates a powerful personal influence, which they were glad to feel and acknowledge. If others rivalled him in some feats of the playground and gymnasium, none excelled in so many, none threw over all sports such a fascination as he. In his seventeenth year he had the happiness to save the life of a school-girl too adventurous in learning to swim. She

had sunk once ; the tide was running rapidly to the sea. Without taking off hat, coat, or shoes, Fitzhugh, who had watched her from the pier, plunged in, seized her as she rose, and supported her till help came.

Among his companions at this school was one afterwards known as General Llewellyn F. Haskell, whose rapid promotion was the reward of equal talent, valor, and good fortune. Another was that brave Quaker, Captain Hallock Mann, whose gallant rescue of General Kilpatrick at Aldie Gap, Virginia, was one of the memorable deeds of the war. Kilpatrick was in the hands of the enemy. Mann, seeing his men hesitate, shouted, " Are you heroes or cowards ? Follow me ! Charge ! " and, without looking back, dashed into

the mellay. His troop, fired by the example, rallied, dispersed the Confederates, and carried him, severely wounded, with the General, from the field. Captain Mann was killed in a subsequent battle.

In the spring of 1859, a wrestling-match with his young friend Mann brought on bleeding at the lungs, which obliged Fitzhugh to abandon his purpose of entering college that year. The following July he sailed for Europe, arriving there shortly after the peace of Villafranca. The Continent was in a ferment; and he was sufficiently well informed to take an excited interest in the questions of the time. From a balcony on the Boulevard, looking down the Rue de la Paix, he saw the triumphal entry into Paris of

the Emperor and the army of Italy. "I suppose war is a great evil," he said, "but it is so splendid that I am half sorry we can never have one at home."

A week later he was in Chamouni. On the Mer de Glace, his party came to a place where two large masses of ice, sloping towards each other, left between them a dangerous crevasse. An Englishman, named Haskin, went from the upper edge of one of these inclined planes, intending to cross it obliquely and join his friends on an ice-mound at the end of the opening. He was beginning to slide helplessly towards destruction, when Fitzhugh ran upon him from the elevation with an impetus sufficient to carry both along the edge of the abyss to a place of safety beyond

it. Of course the story was told in Chamouni. Prince Humbert of Italy, a youth of about the same age, then visiting the Valley, sent an aid with his compliments; and during his stay Fitzhugh was annoyed by the curiosity of travellers.

He was in Berlin at the time of John Brown's attack on Harper's Ferry. He was fascinated by the generosity of the deed, but shocked by the fatal miscalculation which seemed almost to clothe it with the attributes of crime. "You condemn, then, the enterprise, my son," said the American Minister to him, "while you justify John Brown." In the third year of the war he wrote, "I have passed over the scene of John Brown's adventurous raid. He was our leader, after all.

We shall finish his work, and that 'perturbed spirit' may rest in peace."

He remained at Berlin three months, studying German and music. His health seemed re-established; he was the best skater on the ponds of the Thiergarten. Once, after he had performed an evolution of peculiar grace and dexterity, the crown-princess, Victoria of Prussia, witnessing the sport from her carriage, gave with her own hands the signal of applause. He was at Rome during the Carnival; in Paris, at Easter. He landed at Boston in July, 1860, and a few days afterwards entered Harvard College without conditions.

Few allusions to public affairs occur in his letters from Cambridge during the first term. Two days after the at-

tack on Fort Sumter, he wrote: "If the South is in earnest, I shall be in the fight." But he was ill, — "tired of being sick every spring with a cold." His letters to his mother are now devoted, by almost alternate sentences, to his health and the war.

"A very little study affects my head. Boston is splendidly excited. What a horrible war, — fathers against sons, brothers against brothers! Yet the grass in the College yard is green, and the buds are coming out."

April 20. "We have ninety signatures to a petition to the Faculty for a drill-club in our Class. If the Faculty refuse, we shall appeal to the Governor!"

April 26. "Thank you for the Union badge and the violets. All the

students may belong to the Club by getting permission of their parents, and signing an agreement to obey all the rules. My cough hangs on as coughs will."

April 28. "Last evening Governor Andrew sent a message to President Felton, that, having no company ready to guard the Arsenal here, he wished the students to take charge of it. The boating fever has abated ; everything is fight now. Yesterday was the anniversary of the day when Washington first drew his sword as commander of the American Army. An immense war meeting was held under the Washington elm. Governor Banks spoke ; a band played ; a regiment which goes off Tuesday paraded. I shall probably pay you a short visit — till I am better."

He was quite feeble during the most of the summer, but in August grew rapidly stronger. On the 17th of August, at the house of his uncle, Gerrit Smith, in Peterborough, New York, he received a letter from his brother David, who said, "I am now colonel of the regiment called 'Birney's Zouaves.' If you can get your mother's permission, you may go with me as lieutenant." On the envelope is written in pencil, "Would you give me leave to go, if I were intent on it?" "Yes," is the answer in his mother's hand, "if you were well."

At the end of August, Fitzhugh, now a Sophomore, rejoined his Class. October 27th, he wrote: "I have the war-fever again. That fight at Edward's Ferry! — in it six from Har-

ward that I knew, or knew of, were wounded or taken prisoners. And I am not strong ! I might get along in a cavalry regiment. The riding would do me good. What if I did not get along ? I should have done what I could."

To another : " I must go to the war. My father sacrificed all for freedom. My brothers are already in the field. Am I not dishonoring my name and the cause with which it is identified ? "

These reflections weighed on his spirits. His physician shut up his books, recommending some active outdoor employment. November 28th, he wrote from Camp Graham, near Washington : " I am now First Lieutenant, Company A, Twenty-third

Pennsylvania Volunteers, Colonel David B. Birney."

He was soon detached from the regiment for signal duty. "On the battlefield," he wrote, "our position is dangerous. But the greater the danger, the better the service." He acted on the signal corps seven months, and was considered "one of its three most able and accurate officers."

A friend once found him on the Chickahominy, with two attendants, far from any Union force. In this position, very dangerous, but favorable for watching the enemy's movements, he had been several days. A hostile scouting party might have come upon him at any time; but the advantages, he thought, overbalanced the risk, and he stayed.

In February he had an attack of cough and fever, during which he wrote : "I do not like to think of the country. Its situation saddens me. The war is the price of slavery. I hope it will prove to be the price of liberty."

He returned to duty towards the middle of March, but shortly fell sick again, and was nursed by his mother till near the end of April. On the 12th of May he was "on the steamer City of Richmond, at Yorktown, bound for West Point" (Virginia) "and General McClellan." On the 21st of May he wrote : "Eight miles from Richmond! in shirt-sleeves, trying to catch the breeze ; tanned quite brown ; not now the pale, thin, sick boy you nursed so tenderly. General Stoneman

and I have seen Richmond from the balloon." May 23d: "To-day, at the crossing of the Chickahominy, at last I was under fire, and do not think I showed fear."

In the midst of the seven days' battle at Richmond, Lieutenant Birney found time to write to his mother: "The nearest shot to me passed under my arm, cutting the body and sleeve of my coat and shirt. I was in the hottest of the fire at Mechanicsville. The fight is still going on. If anything happens to me, let it console you that I am doing my duty in a just cause. You will not be the only sad one." General William Birney gives a picture of him in this battle: "In the afternoon of the disastrous affair of Gaines's Hill, as my regiment was marching

into the fight, I met Fitzhugh. ‘Ah, brother Will,’ he cried, ‘we have the Rebels this time!’ ‘What makes you think so?’ said I; ‘it looks the other way to me.’ ‘They say so at headquarters,’ he answered, ‘and I know they are in high spirits about it. They say we shall bag at least ten thousand.’ In a few hours the Rebels had bagged many of us, myself among the number.”

Colonel David B. Birney having become Brigadier-General, Lieutenant Birney wrote, “I hope soon to be brother’s Aid.” August 1, 1862, he was commissioned as “Assistant Adjutant-General of the Second Brigade, of Kearney’s division, with the rank of Captain.” He added to the duties of this position those of Aid in the field.

“ His delivery of orders under fire was clear, concise, and correct.”

In the second battle of Bull Run, Captain Birney's collar-bone was broken by the falling of his horse. This was the only hurt he received in two years and a half of dangerous service, during which he participated in more than twenty engagements.

After the battle of Fredericksburg he wrote : “ You at home must suffer more from anxiety than we do from cold, exposure, and battle. It was hard for you to know that so fierce a fight was raging, and that we three were in the hottest of it. You ask me how I felt. There is intense excitement as the tide of battle ebbs and flows. If one's own party are advancing, there is a glow of exultation ; if retreating, a

passion to turn the enemy back. 'T was so the other day when Meade's Pennsylvania Reserves, to which we were support, advanced in a long, magnificent line of battle, as if on parade. All was quiet when they started, but in an instant the roar of cannon and the rattle of musketry were deafening. Twenty minutes it lasted. Then from the woods directly in front of us came out a shattered mass of troops in perfect disorder. It seems to me that I could have died a hundred deaths to turn the scale. . . . One of our colonels well describes our position that day, — 'The Rebels were in the boxes and we in the pit.' It was a Roman amphitheatre, and we were the poor beasts exposed on the arena."

April 28, 1863. "We expect a

great battle all around Fredericksburg. Should I fall, remember the cause I am fighting for and forget your grief in consoling others. God will protect me. Your beautiful flowers will be in my pocket."

May 5. "In the field, Chancellorsville. I am safe. My horse Prince was shot in the leg. He threw me off, vanished in the war-cloud, and I have not seen him since.

"So you wondered what the same moon shone on that night by the Rapahannock. On the Third Army Corps, cut off from the rest of the army, massed on the field, its lines of battle facing both ways, to the front and to the rear; pickets all around us, for we knew not whence the attack might come; our brigade lying behind the

batteries as support in case of attack ; the other two brigades moving silently forwards into the black woods. A stillness like that of the grave ! Suddenly a crash of musketry all along the line, and the fierce opening of cannon ! This was half an hour before midnight. In fifteen minutes all was over, and the bright, beautiful moon shone on the piles of the dead and dying.”

May 14. “ Although the General is my brother, I must praise him. He is cool, kind, and firm. Good soldiers like him ; but the shirks complain. You know what a splendid horseman he is. I have tried to do my duty for his sake. Saturday night, after we had made the night attack in which Stonewall Jackson was killed and Kearney

avenged, he had no blankets. I got him one, and we lay down together and slept. It was pleasant for us both to be there unharmed. The next day I was sitting by his side on horseback, when a shell exploded close to us. A piece passing under my arm struck him a severe blow on the belt."

July 5th, he wrote from Gettysburg: "Yesterday our band played the national airs amid the shouts of a victorious army."

The promotion of his brother David to the rank of Major-General was followed by the promotion of Captain Birney. His commission as Assistant Adjutant-General, with the rank of Major, is dated September 15, 1863.

November 30th, he sent a pencilled note from Mine Run: "We assault the

enemy's works at eight, A. M. We are to charge up an open slope half a mile long." December 3d: "Back at Brandy Station. No defeat, but disgraceful failure."

On Christmas-day, 1863, Major Birney married Laura, youngest daughter of the late Jacob Strattan, of Philadelphia, — a lady with whom he became acquainted when both were pupils at Eagleswood. It is harder for him "now to be away from home than it ever has been before," but he will "stay till the good work is done."

In April he says: — "Since my marriage life seems to me doubly precious and doubly uncertain. I need more than ever true Christian resignation to bear with composure whatever lot. I glory in being the soldier of a

noble cause. If it is God's will that I fall, — well, I do not complain."

From Chancellorsville, May 4th, he writes: "With what humiliation we left this place a year ago to-day! The graves are very many. Violets do what they can to cheer the desolation."

Through the spring of 1864 he suffered from cold and cough; towards the end of May it became evident that he was breaking down. The General's confidence in him invited constant over-exertion; and he was too sensitive to accept the proffered assistance of his friends. He positively refused to go on the sick-list, "when so many able-bodied men were shirking their duty." He "determined to stay with the old red diamond" (the division badge)

“till it reached Richmond, or die on the road.” The last two days of May he suffered severely from want of sleep, coughing violently whenever he lay down. Unwillingly he allowed his tent-mate to hold him in his arms that he might rest. All this time, studiously concealing his condition as far as possible, he performed his official labors. June 2d, he wrote to his wife: “I shall, perhaps, have to give up duty for a day or two. Nothing but a spasmodic cough.” It was pneumonia. June 5th he wrote, on board the steamer: “Here I am on my way to you, — not wounded. I shall rest a day in Washington, at Duddington.” (Duddington is the old Carroll mansion, still inhabited by members of the Carroll family, cousins of Major Birney’s

mother.) He reached Duddington on the 6th of June. Though very sick and travel-worn, he wrote with his own hand the telegraphic messages that summoned his wife and mother to his side. He bore his physical sufferings with cheerfulness and patience, and looked forward with resignation to the end ; but he showed a soldier's sensitiveness at dying of disease. The day he died, he said to a wounded cousin, "I wish I had that bullet through my body." Once he asked, musingly, "Who will care for mother now?" An hour after his death came the invitation to attend the exercises of his Class-Day at Cambridge. It was the 17th of June, 1864, — the anniversary of the battle of Bunker's Hill.

Fitzhugh Birney was an uncommonly

handsome man, tall, athletic, and apparently robust, but unable to endure long-continued hardship and exposure. He was an excellent horseman and a passionate hunter. He never got lost ; his knowledge of place was instinctive and unerring, like an Indian's. Courage, truthfulness, and generosity, which distinguished his boyhood, were yet more conspicuous ornaments of his brief manhood. He was always helping others ; but others rarely found it possible to help him. The gentleness of his manners veiled from most observers the singular decision of his character. He was little influenced by the opinions of others ; but, having formed his own, he adhered to them without obtrusion or argument. Genial in temper, fond of society and mirth, he

maintained strictly temperate habits. When the circle of his friends was hilarious with wine and revel, this boy with the beardless chin and the steady, brown eyes, the gayest of the company, was never flushed. Genuine self-respect and principles deeply implanted kept him pure amid the extraordinary temptations to which his beauty, kindness, and universal popularity exposed him. Of one thus richly endowed with bright faculties and instinctive virtues, which were still further recommended by the charm of fine demeanor, the impartial judgment becomes spontaneous praise.

He was buried by his father's side at Hampton, the old homestead of the Fitzhughs, near Geneseo, Livingston County, New York. A posthumous

daughter, born in November, bears his name.

Of the five sons of James G. Birney living at the outbreak of the war, four entered the Union Army, of whom three died in the service. *Noblesse oblige.*

Major-General David B. Birney had been Lieutenant-Colonel in the Philadelphia volunteer militia before the war, and in that capacity accompanied his regiment into the field. In the fall of 1861, he raised the Twenty-third Regiment, Pennsylvania Volunteers, known as "Birney's Zouaves." He long commanded the famous Kearney's division of the Third Corps. For distinguished services he was promoted to the command of the Tenth Corps, won an important battle on the 7th of Oc-

tober, 1864, and died eleven days after, in Philadelphia.

Brigadier-General William Birney, at the beginning of the war, was residing at Perth Amboy, New Jersey. He abandoned a prosperous law practice in New York City, and entered the service as Captain in a New Jersey regiment. He was with the Army of the Potomac in all its early battles, rose to the rank of Colonel, and, as superintendent of the organization of colored troops in Maryland and at Washington, sent seven thousand into the field. He was made Brigadier-General in 1863, commanded in Florida after the disastrous battle of Olustee, recovered all the territory lost by that battle, and was promoted to the command of the Third Division, Tenth Corps, in Au-

gust, 1864. This division, afterwards known as the Third Division of the Twenty-fifth Corps, he commanded until the surrender of Lee.

Lieutenant Dion Birney, a practising physician in Bay County, Michigan, was commissioned as First Lieutenant in the Twenty-third Pennsylvania Volunteers. He served during the winter of 1861, and through the most of the Peninsular campaign of 1862. Owing to impaired health, he was obliged to leave the army; and he died soon afterwards in Cincinnati.

Hon. James Birney, the eldest son of James G. Birney, was, at the beginning of the war, a Circuit Judge in Michigan. His son, James G. Birney, enlisted as private, and rose to the rank of Captain.

By his father, Major Fitzhugh Birney was first-cousin of the Confederate General Humphrey Marshall; by his mother, a more distant relative of the Confederate General Fitzhugh Lee.

Cambridge: Printed by Welch, Bigelow, & Co.





